

Pamphlet file

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Indiana
Black Oak

BLACK OAK file - history

HISTORY
OF
BLACK OAK

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Looking at Black Oak today, we generally reach with a negative attitude. It is an area that most people would like to by-pass if at all possible because of its' ill reputation. But turning back in time to the "good old days", this isn't the same case. Being one of the first areas to be built up in Gary, it had a real purpose. It was used as a rest stop or, at one time, a guiding point for the travelers before reaching their destiny.

Sitting on the front porch of the once ago post office and watching the many travelers go by and giving them assistance to their needs, was remembered in a recent interview of Henry Ewen, age 94, who's still living in the area with his daughter and her family, the Nimetzes. He said he could still remember telling them where to turn, and if they liked, they could rest up at the saloon across the street.

The people of Black Oak were proud to live there, because it was them who built it up. Black Oak was never meant to be a "run down area", but who has the answer? Nonetheless, the relatives of the first families are still proud to live there. It is their home regardless of how anyone else sees it.

These people with their heartwarming attitudes make the history Black Oak an interesting one. Most people condemn the area without realizing it too has a meaningful background.

It all started in 1840 when James Ewen, age 23, and his wife sailed from England to New York. After a short stay, they traveled to Chicago in a covered wagon, drawn by a team of oxen. A friend of theirs, Captain William Watts, had come to the United States some time before and settled in Hessville,

Indiana, just to the east of Chicago. When Watts heard that the Ewens had arrived in Chicago, he went to see them and encouraged them to purchase land near Hessville, which was sparsely populated. There were a few German families and some Indians, but both were widely scattered. The Ewens accepted Watts' suggestion.

They found 90 acres that had been claimed by a man named Charley Shrader. He made a clearing in the woods and had built a log cabin, when he was called to serve in the Civil War. He never returned. The United States Government repossessed the property. Then in 1864, sold it to James Ewen.

It was divided by the Little Calumet River, about 50 acres south and 40 acres north. The greater part of the land was dense forest, inhabited by deer, bear, timber wolves, and many smaller animals such as rabbits, squirrels, mink, opossum, fox, etc. The river was filled with turtles, frogs, and fish. The land was also blessed with strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, huckleberries, wild grapes, crab apples, plums, and cherries. The Ewen family took ~~family~~ advantage of this and started to build their foundation.

The Michigan Central Railroad ran through the county about two miles north of where Black Oak now stands, and had a station at Tolleston, four miles to the east, built around the early 1800's. In 1883 the Nickel Plate Railroad bought a right of way along the south end of the river, and built a railroad across the country. They had a "flag stop" one quarter mile to the west of the Ewen home, named Calumet.

In 1873, the people of Tolleston built a hunting lodge named The Tolleston Club of Chicago. This club was used by

Chicago executives. The areas of the lodge and the Ewen land overlapped slightly, and people who were not members were considered "poachers". They were shot at for supposedly trespassing. Henry Ewen, a son of James Ewen, was one of these unfortunate victims. Luckily, he received only superficial wounds. In 1897, a battle between residents and guards left four participants wounded and one killed. This brutal action put an end to The Tolleston Club of Chicago.

Around the late 1800's, Mrs. Ewen died, and James Ewen married the oldest daughter of his friend Captain William Watts, Elizabeth Ann, twenty-five years younger than he. At the time of the marriage, James Ewen was having a large house built at the site of what is now 29th and Calhoun.

James and Elizabeth Ann lived in the log cabin until the new house was finished. The new place was known as Ewen Hunters Home of Calumet, Indiana. It housed people who were traveling through the country, and also people who came out of Chicago for a few days of recreation, hunting, or fishing along the Little Calumet River. In the winter, only rabbit and bird hunting was done. The Ewens rented boats and provided food and lodging.

Approximately 1899, Ewen traded 20 acres south of the river to John Nimetz for 8 more acres along the river.

The Ewens had seven children, all of whom have passed on except Henry, who, as mentioned earlier, is still living in the area.

In 1900, Ewen sold 30 acres of the land north of the Nickel

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Plate Railroad to a New York syndicate. They plotted the land north of 29th and Calhoun and sold some of its lots.

John Seberger, who originally lived in Crown Point in the early 1900's, bought from the syndicate a piece of land south of 29th to the Nickel Plate Railroad. There he built a saloon known as the Halfway House. This was a midway stopping point between Crown Point and Chicago. Seberger gave up the saloon to Frank Scheidt, who also wanted a share of the land. He married Seberger's daughter, Susan. They kept the saloon running until the prohibition days, when it temporarily became a grocery store. In the 1930's, it was converted back to a saloon. After John Seberger gave his saloon up, he bought adjacent land to the west, and built a cement block factory.

Shortly after James Ewen had sold the land, he died. Five years later, Elizabeth Ann Ewen married a newcomer to the area, Jacob Nickel. They opened a store on the corner, opposite the saloon, in a large house, and applied to the United States Government for a post office to be named Calumet. The Post Office Department asked if there was any type of land mark that could be used for a name. The only thing the Nickels could think of was the large black oak tree that stood on the corner (northeast) of what is now 29th and Calhoun, frequently used in guiding travelers. Moreover, they believed black oak trees were strong and grew fast. They hoped that their newly formed town would do the same. Thus, Black Oak got its name.

When the post office was opened in the Nickel's store, one bag of mail came in and one went out daily. This was known as Van Loon. The mail bag was hung on a long arm, and the mail

train (EJ&E) snatched it off as it flew by, tossing the full mail bag out.

The main through-fare from Crown Point to Black Oak was Calhoun Street. This street and 29th Avenue were the center of the town. Later, Colfax, Burr, and Clark Road were constructed.

A one room school located on 29th (a block west of the saloon) was built in the 1940's, which combined all grade levels. When it burned down a few years later, a new one was constructed at 29th and Burr. This one was twice as large consisting of two rooms and a basement. Now the grades could be split into two groups. This building also burned down, but was later constructed on that spot used only as an elementary school. "I can still see the piano falling to the basement," remembered Mrs. Dorothy Coffman (formerly Dorothy Scheidt), who was a student at the time.

After Gary, Indiana began, high school students went to Edison or Horace Mann. A few students went to Griffith, but they had to pay tuition. Calumet High School was built in 1945, but initially was only first year of high school requirements. As Black Oak grew, the school increased to four years. This is now Ridge Junior High. About a block to the east is the current Calumet High School built in the early 1960's.

People from diverse ethnic backgrounds moved into the area over the years. Industries started growing, like the steel mills, and people needed a place to live. The land was inexpensive, so Black Oak became the melting pot of Gary. All types of stores, restaurants, gas stations, crowded out the

trees and wild animals. Today, Black Oak isn't actually a part of Gary, but the mailing addresses are Gary; the phone numbers are Hammond.

Black Oak has been stereotyped as a place you wouldn't want to live or even visit. This, however, isn't altogether true. We found that after doing Black Oak's history it wasn't as bad as we thought. In some areas there are rather nice places, and the residents are proud to be a part of it. There are, of course, a fair share of sub-standard dwellings. But again, this doesn't seem to mar the residents' pride. The families of the community, however, wish to preserve Black Oak's heritage. So before we start to condemn, we should take into consideration that this is someone's home, and it did play a major part in Gary's history.